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Afghanistan: the Challenges Ahead

BY THOMAS JOHNSON and ALEC METZ

The situation in Afghanistan is not getting better, although it has the potential to. The problem, of course, is that if Afghanistan continues down a path of instability and insurgency it runs the very real risk of once again devolving in to a failed state.

An assessment of troubling indicators such as number of IED attacks, suicide bombings, insurgent incidents, and infrastructure damage (to name just a few) suggest that trends are getting worse in Afghanistan rather than better. The world can ill-afford such an Afghanistan, and the sooner the underlying problems are addressed in a pragmatic and holistic manner, the smaller the cost will be to the international community. There is no question that Canada's involvement in Afghanistan is vital to mission success in that conflict-torn country.



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One of the greatest mistakes NATO has made, and can continue to make in Afghanistan is to confront the issues of extremism and insurgency in a primarily military (or kinetic) manner. What the Taliban and other insurgents have sought to do is drive a wedge between foreign forces and the Afghan people through intimidation of the population, and a sustained campaign against any weaknesses in the defenses of foreign forces. The Taliban have implemented a strategy designed to force NATO to use overwhelming firepower (such as through the use of air power). The suicide bombing earlier this year of the Serena Hotel in Kabul, and the almost constant attacks on international aid organizations and their Afghan counterparts highlight this; in essence, the goal of the Taliban and other insurgent organizations is not to "beat" NATO forces, but to nurture the same conditions of instability that instigated the first Taliban regime, from 1996 to 2001.

By convincing local Afghans, especially in the Southern hinterlands, of their isolation (lately by destroying the mobile phone towers that made up the bulk of Southern Afghanistan's communications system), the Taliban are seeking to further stall and reverse development in that country. The Taliban are aware that development hurts their cause and they will do anything to hinder the international community's relatively meager attempts at bettering the lives of individual Afghans. The Taliban's only viable promise is that they would be better than anarchy. That they are the main driver behind said anarchy is something they are doing their best to obscure, such as in their claim that it is the Coalition Forces' use of mobile phones as tracking devices that is forcing them to destroy the towers. Similarly, they have claimed that their main goal is to force foreign forces from an Islamic

land. That the vast majority of their victims are Afghan Muslims seems to fly directly in the face of their assertions.

What is needed in Afghanistan is commitment and then explicit action, both in terms of security and development. Canada has done a noble job on both counts, but the fight is far from over.

The Taliban, as a negative force, bring nothing to the Afghan people. While the Afghan people know this, they also know that it is unwise to be on a losing side. If it becomes apparent that the international coalition, initially so enthusiastic to free Afghanistan from decades of civil war and isolation, is again deserting the country (like the U.S. did after the Soviets abandoned their occupation in February of 1989), many Afghans may become resigned to, or forced to accept, a Taliban resurgence. This would truly be tragic, and leave us, if not worse off, than at least no better than we were seven years ago. It would give credence to the howls of extremists across the globe that tolerance, democracy, and international engagement can be rolled back.

For Afghanistan itself, a Taliban return would be cataclysmic. On top of the ethnic and religious friction that the Taliban previously exploited with a lethal opportunism, draconian social laws would be reinstituted, an entire new crop of young students would be denied education, and those even suspected of collaboration – those who placed trust in the promises of ISAF/NATO forces – would be exterminated with a ruthless brutality. For all these reasons, the NATO commitment, and the commitment of NATO member-states, is vital for success in Afghanistan.

Since the recent introduction of a motion to lengthen Canada's commitment in Afghanistan by two years, Canada has taken a long, hard look at the conflict in Afghanistan. Its southern neighbor knows this, and is more anxious than many might think. NATO involvement in Afghanistan has been a notoriously patchwork affair, and many member nations have placed such restrictions, or caveats, on their forces as to render them ineffectual. Canada, however, has been one of NATO's most active members, and one of the Afghan government's most reliable partners in its attempts to secure the South. Canada's Parliament has now committed to another two years. For serious Afghanistan analysts, this is a promising sign; Canada's involvement is integral to peace and development in Southern Afghanistan. But the counter-insurgency campaign will not be finished by 2011. A favored Taliban saying is that "while the foreigners may have the watches, we have the time." The patience of the Taliban may ultimately be their most important weapon. Make no mistake about it; this is a long war. The conflict and bloodshed will most certainly extend beyond 2011.



A young boy poses after the inauguration ceremony opening a new bridge. The project employed 30 Afghans for three months. The bridge will allow passage over an irrigation canal and will be very helpful during the rainy season.

But why, and what have we done so far? Six years in, and the original why becomes lost in a myopic fixation on the present. The Taliban's reign was a danger to the West due to the space and safe haven they offered terrorist groups, and was detrimental to the people of Afghanistan through a strangulating web of draconian gynophobia, extremism, and racism. They were a danger to South and Central Asia and the world, by providing sanctuary and training to terrorists from the Philippines to the Maghreb and even to Canada. Since 2001, the Taliban's shift in tactics, from the lynching of children for being in possession of dollars, to the rapid expansion of the pernicious heroin trade, has illuminated the group's primary goal of self-preservation. Most of the Taliban violence in Southern Afghanistan and the neighboring tribal area of Pakistan is directed against other Pashtuns; this is no more an ethnic conflict than it is a religious one. The Taliban and other insurgent groups are fighting to survive, and fighting for power. And in their mindset, the ends justify the means.

Six years of ISAF/NATO involvement have not been as successful as many would have liked. Errors in goals and kill/capture tactics have frayed the NATO alliance, almost to the point of no return. The U.S. foray into Iraq took away much of the manpower and equipment the conflict in Afghanistan required, and in many ways still does. But the U.S. knows that its presence in Afghanistan is vital, and to that end has committed at least another 3,200 marines to the force there. Additionally, in view of Canada's commitment debate, President Bush has called on other NATO members to assist Canada in the volatile Southern regions of Afghanistan.

Although it has been predicted in previous years, this spring is pivotal for the future of Afghanistan. The much vaunted "spring offensive" of 2007 never came to pass (although there was a later summer offensive of shorter duration), for a number of complex reasons. This year, however, the Taliban seem to be preparing in earnest for serious engagements, and a long, bloody campaign of harassment. Similarly, on the political front, they are well aware of the debates taking place in Brussels, Ottawa, Washington, Amsterdam and elsewhere as to the future of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. They see the Coalition looking at their watches and sense victory, a return of Afghanistan to the middle-ages.

Similar to the Tet offensive of Vietnam in 1968, their goal is not to beat NATO forces in symmetrical engagements, for the simple reason that they can't. Instead, the insurgents' goal in Afghanistan is to have convinced enough of the Coalition by the end of 2008 that victory in Afghanistan is far off, and not worth the price. They will send squads of suicide bombers off to die, and they may decimate their own ranks, and do whatever it takes in order to separate NATO forces and the Afghan populous through fear. This must be tackled with the utmost resolve by NATO and by Canada.

The vote in parliament on March 13th has been watched closely in every NATO capital, and in every town and city that has sent its young men and women to serve in this conflict.

At the end of the day, this fight means the most to the Afghan people – a point that is often forgotten; it will either bring development, prosperity, and opportunities, or it will lay waste to another generation.

Any nation, Canada, the U.S., or another, that lets Afghanistan slip away into that dark night will regret their failure, sooner or later. But be prepared, Canada; these new wars are prolonged affairs.

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